

Andrzej Pitrus
Jagiellonian University

My life in art. A conversation with Bill Viola

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Andrzej Pitrus: You started making art videos in early '70, when most of the artists were influenced by conceptualism. Although your works were different, there are some elements of conceptual art in early works (*Tape I, Level* etc). Was this tradition important for you? Is it important now?

Bill Viola: Conceptual for me is another word for exploration and experimentation. In the early years, it was important to find out how this new medium of video worked, what the camera did, and how far you could push the live or recorded image until it disintegrated.

You mention Nam June Paik as one of your masters. In what way did he influence your work?

Nam June Paik was a visionary and a cherished mentor to me. He taught me that you could take ordinary objects or images and transform them into a radical statement on the way we perceive the world. I was privileged, as his assistant on many occasions, to watch him work and make creative decisions toward achieving his extraordinary artwork.

In your opinion, video is much closer to audio recording than film. In your early works, sound is usually important; more recent ones are usually silent or include only “diegetic” sound. Do you plan to explore sound (what aspects) in your future projects?

For a long time, I always recorded the sound together with the image and pretty much used that sound the way it came, even when being cut or slowed down. When I began

working in 35 mm for some pieces that needed extreme slow motion, I could not record the sound at the same time because of the noise of the camera, or directions that needed to be relayed at the time of filming. So for the works where sound was needed, I began working with sound designers who helped to bring a different kind of environment to the works. The piece always determines if there is sound or not. With the Passions series pieces (mostly shot in 35 mm film) that are an exploration of the emotions, they are silent as I wanted the emotions to come through loudly.

“Reflecting Pool” is probably one of the most iconic of all Bill Viola's works. You include it in most of the exhibitions, even those that focus on more recent works. Why?

People tend to show this work frequently, it has the whole mystery of life embedded in seven minutes, death: with the jump into the water; life: the reflections in the water; and rebirth: the new-born exiting naked from the water.

I really enjoy your immersive installations. It is a pity you exhibit them so rarely. Is it because of technical problems (they are certainly more difficult to transport), or do you consider them a “closed chapter”? Now you prefer projections or plasma panels. Do you have plans to create more “walk-in” installations in the future?

We have always included the video installations in larger exhibitions where space is available. They are immersive and often visceral. When the plasma and LCD screens came out in the second part of the 90s, they fascinated me and were perfect for my study of the emotions. I continue to make both kinds of works.

Many video artists of the '60s and '70s rejected traditional aesthetic categories (including beauty). You “rediscovered” them for media art. Weren't you tempted to remake *Reflecting Pool* in high definition? In the late '70s you were very limited by technology. Yet, this video is still so fascinating as a beautiful image.

There are some videotapes and installations that I have restored or re-edited, and usually that is because I have the raw materials in good shape, and saw that my vision was better served by upgrading the piece, but most of the works remain the same. It is not always important to have the clarity of high definition, in fact sometimes the clearer the image,

the less we see.

I guess that as a very young person you were not interested in making films. Later, while making *Passions*, you decided to use some elements film technology. Why? Was it only because video was not perfect enough? Steve McQueen, who used to be a video artist, now makes movies? Aren't you tempted too?

I have never been interested in the limitations of film, and of the narrative way of making films. I used 35 mm film only for its slow motion capabilities; the camera that I used was able to shoot at 300 frames per second, to achieve smooth slow motion. Now video can easily do that.

Another formula you experimented with (but not too much) is interactive art. I have seen (and played with) your “Night Journey” in Liverpool. It attracted lots of people who were not really familiar with media art. Most of them were gamers. Is it still a work in progress? Do you plan to release it commercially as an “art house game”?

The Night Journey has been a long-term collaboration with the Game Innovation Lab of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. We hope to complete it soon, once we transpose it to a new platform.

What is your opinion on interactive art generally? Do you enjoy it as viewers/users? Do you think it still allows the artist to control the meaning of the artwork?

There is another work I made in 1997 with ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, *The Tree of Knowledge*, which is an interactive computer/video installation. It gives the viewer the freedom to move within a long corridor to control the digital growth (and death) of a tree, but within certain parameters. The meaning of the work does not change just because someone else can control the outcome.

In most of your works, you prefer “analogue” technologies instead of CGI (eg. “waterfall” in *Transfigurations* which could be replaced with CGI). Do you think computer generated images have their place in video art? To what extent do you

use computers? Was they used in “Angel at the Door” for example?

I work with the elements and find that there is no need to change nature; it is a very powerful force. The only time it is not real is when we “burn” an actor. Fire is dangerous and we need to build the flames in the edit room, but even then, most of the time, these are real flames recorded on “plate shots” and not CGI. Angel at the door is real; there were two actors in the shot at the end.

Your musical collaborations are really surprising. Three different projects: popular music, experimental music and opera. I wonder if you have any other similar plans? Also, what was the reason for your collaboration with Trent Reznor? I really liked it, but it was quite brave to show your video to a completely different audience.

I have collaborated on very few “music videos” because I don’t usually collaborate too well. I was quite attracted to the music of these three projects and admired the composers. Trent called one day and asked me to listen to some of the tracks that he wanted me to work on, and I found his work to be exceptional, so I agreed. He is a very talented musician and composer.

Bill Viola's works are really sophisticated and require lots of knowledge and competence. Yet, some people experience them without this knowledge. For example, once in MOMA “Information” was exhibited with very little *information* (or even no info at all) on how the work was created. Is it possible—in your opinion—to ‘read’ your works without proper knowledge about their context? With one's emotions only?

I feel it is always important to approach a new experience with an open mind. We often don’t put wall labels next to the work so that the viewer can interact on their own terms with the piece, and to allow the work to speak with them directly. We don’t like descriptive texts unless they are part of a brochure that people can reference later, as a memory. We plan the exhibitions as a journey, where the works interact with each other, and the viewers are “submerged” into another world.

I was surprised to see members of the Viola family in recent works. Kira Perov has been a close collaborator of Bill Viola for over 30 years. Now she appears in

***Chapel of Frustrated Actions...*, there is also Blake Viola, and a self-portrait for Uffizi. Is your art becoming more and more personal?**

I have always used myself or friends and family in my work, and of course actors and performers too. Kira has been part of the work all along, she has been the producer on all projects and worked on every shoot. She manages our whole operation. As photographer, she has documented our life's work and she edits all our publications. It is hard not to include personal subjects, when the art is actually the life.

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